

In Defense of Shared Governance

Columbia University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors

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The Columbia Chapter of the AAUP calls on our colleagues across the university to stand up and claim our necessary and rightful place in the governance of an institution in crisis.

Over the last eighteen months, Columbia University has been shaken by unprecedented events: attacks by the federal government on our institutional autonomy and research capacity; actions from various quarters to limit academic freedom and the right to political speech and public assembly; and rapid turnover in university leadership.

In response, our senior administration, guided by the Board of Trustees, has taken a series of actions which, in an attempt to placate the Trump administration, have weakened academic freedom and shared governance and accelerated an institutional slide toward executive rule, echoing the authoritarian ethos now holding sway in Washington. As the Trump administration has demanded ever more draconian crackdowns on student protest, our administration has responded by granting enhanced powers to public security that can as easily escalate as defuse confrontations with students and that last night did not prevent the administration from again summoning the NYPD to campus.

The tragic events of last night illustrate the countervailing and urgent need for developing consultation protocols and mediation strategies that mitigate harm during protests, facilitate informed and balanced reporting, and ensure due process for all parties.

Even before last night's protests, over the past several days events had come to a new point of crisis. The announcement of the layoffs of 180 colleagues brings home the tragic impact of the Trump administration's cuts to federal funding on the lives and livelihoods of members of our community and on critical research that represents the future of science, medicine, and public health.

At this moment of crisis and during a transition in leadership, the Acting President, in tandem with the Board of Trustees, has announced that she will undertake a review and subsequent "reform" of the University Senate. The Columbia Chapter of the AAUP strenuously objects to both the timing and the plan for conducting such a review. It is being set in motion following a series of hastily convened "listening sessions" whose purpose seems to have been to provide the appearance of faculty consultation for a decision that had already been determined. The composition of the "review" committee that has been announced is so lacking in balance and representational range that its legitimacy must be questioned on those grounds alone.

It is crucial for all of us to recognize that the Senate is the only governing body at Columbia that includes elected representatives from every school and brings together faculty, staff, students, and administrators in the shared governance of many aspects of university life. For over 50 years, it has undertaken tasks essential to the well-being of the institution, including the defense of academic freedom, tenure, and the rights of non-tenure track faculty; oversight of the rules of conduct; review of the university budget; and a substantial role in the management of crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

In imposing this review at this time and in this manner, the President and the Board of Trustees are taking aim at shared governance and replacing it with top-down corporate management, indicating a profound misunderstanding of what university leadership and [fiduciary obligations](#) require. A better course would be immediately to provide the Senate with staff resources to allow the timely execution of its duties and, at a future date, to follow the usual university review processes based on self-review and peer-review before any substantive changes to this crucial body are undertaken.

Instead of dismantling the structures of shared governance, the AAUP calls on university leadership to work with faculty and other stakeholders to mount a unified response to the current crisis. In this spirit we urge the senior administration and the Board of Trustees to join the lawsuit initiated by the AAUP and the American Federation of Teachers to defend Columbia colleagues (faculty, researchers, postdocs, and grad students) whose research funding has been arbitrarily and unlawfully withdrawn. We urge the Acting President and Board of Trustees to pursue, in concert with other universities, further legal remedies for restoring frozen funding or cancelled grants and to lobby Congress, perhaps with a cadre of Columbia's most distinguished scientists, for the restoration of science funding in the coming budget negotiations.

Finally, the AAUP calls for an enhanced role for faculty as equal partners in the upcoming presidential search. Since President Bollinger left office, the appointment of successive presidents has not resulted in leadership that could successfully carry us through this moment of crisis. We urge the Board of Trustees to bring other members of the university community into the search process in a truly inclusive way. Whoever is chosen as President must have the trust of faculty, students, and staff; must listen attentively to their concerns; and must draw on their expertise to help solve the unprecedented problems we face as a university and as a nation. A boldly inclusive search is an imperative; it would acknowledge that extraordinary times require extraordinary responses and that there can be no solution to our current trials without respect and working alliances between university leadership and the heart of Columbia: its faculty and its students.

The AAUP therefore makes the following urgent recommendations:

1. That the President and Board of Trustees stand down from their current plan to review and reform the Senate. Any future plan for reform must adhere to democratic principles.
2. That that they open the Presidential search process to more equal faculty participation in light of current exigencies
3. That the university join the AAUP/AFT suit regarding lost or frozen science funding and develop a more aggressive legal posture to defend Columbia's mission, autonomy, and financial well-being
4. That leadership call on the expertise of the faculty in devising and executing these and other strategies for our defense
5. That the university radically enhance its mediation, consultation, and de-escalation protocols for immediate deployment during campus disturbances, especially student protests

6. That faculty across all schools and divisions of the university join the AAUP in calling for the adoption of these recommendations